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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 006724

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SUBJECT: BANGLADESH HEADS TOWARD RENEWED OPPOSITION BLOCKADE

REF: DHAKA 06719

Classified By: DCM Geeta Pasi, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The government and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party have offered some changes in the election schedule, but the Awami League says this is not enough to avert a resumption of its nationwide blockade. Political tensions are inching up, as reflected by an apparent rampage this afternoon by opposition lawyers at the Supreme Court and growing perceptions of Chief Adviser Ahmed as ineffective and biased toward the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Opposition leaders have dismissed as impractical a proposal by Nobel Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus for an interim one-year coalition government. End Summary.

Renewed Blockade Looms

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¶2. (SBU) Opposition leaders have threatened to re-impose on December 3 their nationwide non-stop transportation blockade unless the Election Commission is "genuinely" reconstituted, Chief Adviser Ahmed resigns, and the election schedule is canceled. Earlier this week, they filed writ petitions challenging the authority and actions of the chief adviser and the Election Commission, and they continued to hold daily, peaceful sit-ins near the Election Commission and the presidency.

¶3. (SBU) Late November 29, Presidential press secretary and confidant Mukhlesur Rahman met separately to discuss election schedule modifications with Awami League president Sheikh Hasina and Bangladesh Nationalist Party chairperson Khaleda Zia.

¶4. (C) According to Awami League presidium member Kazi Zafarullah, Rahman suggested some changes might be possible and that other issues of concern could also be discussed. However, he insisted to us that it is "highly unlikely" the Awami League would "fall into the trap" of deferring its blockade program in exchange for a few election schedule changes. The caretaker government and the former ruling party, he declared, have misinterpreted the opposition's peaceful demonstrations as evidence the opposition is posturing and will contest the election without further concessions. "That presumption is wrong," he said.

¶5. (C) Rahman told us that Hasina demanded cancellation of the entire election schedule until the voter list is fixed, even if that means extending, under the constitutional doctrine of necessity clause, the 90-day clock started by the caretaker government's assumption of duty. She also called for the removal of Election Commissioner Zakaria. When pressed, Rahman said, Hasina agreed she had undertaken not to insist on Zakaria's departure when former Chief Election

Commissioner Aziz went on leave, but claimed party hawks are pressuring her on this issue. She also reportedly blamed pro-Awami League media for whipping up party activists to the point where it is hard for her to compromise. (Note: Bangladesh Nationalist Party leaders assert Hasina is hobbled by hard-liners who oppose elections under any circumstances, either because they fear the party would lose or they would fail to win their own seats. The actual strength of such hard-liners is unclear.)

¶6. (C) Rahman also reported that, in their meeting, Zia agreed to changing the candidate registration deadlines or even delaying the election a few days, provided these changes do not push polling day beyond the January 25 expiration date of the 90-day clock. (Note: Zia told ambassador the same thing-*reftel*). He also claimed he stressed to Zia the importance of Chief Adviser Ahmed's acting in a visibly neutral manner, and that pressurizing phone calls to him from senior party figures should stop. Zia reportedly agreed to both points.

¶7. (C) Chief Adviser Ahmed's reaction to these meetings, Rahman said, was to order maximum flexibility by the Election Commission in facilitating correction of the voter list.

Yunus's Modest Proposal

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¶8. (SBU) At a mass reception yesterday hosted by the mayor of Dhaka honoring his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, Muhammad Yunus urged the two main parties to commit to participation in the upcoming election and to join an interim one-year coalition government regardless of the outcome. Whichever party lost the election, he said, should still get one third

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of the seats in the new cabinet. The interim government would be charged with finding a lasting solution to Bangladesh's political crisis and creating a better climate for a regular general election.

¶9. (C) While former law minister Moudud Ahmed told reporters the proposal deserved serious consideration, Awami League officials dismissed it as impractical. Organizing Secretary Aktaruzzaman savaged the proposal as designed to frustrate his party's electoral supremacy, and noted it came from a non-politician who earlier this month gave President Ahmed an "A plus" for his performance as chief adviser. Another mid-level official called the proposal the work of a "mad man." Hard-line presidium member Tofael Ahmed said Yunus should resolve the political crisis before proposing a formula for power sharing.

Awami League Lawyers Rampage at Court

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¶10. (SBU) Press contacts report that pro-Awami League lawyers this afternoon vandalized court premises after Chief Justice Hussain intervened to stop a two-judge panel from delivering its response to their writ petitions challenging the legitimacy and actions of Chief Adviser Ahmed and the Election Commission. Attorney General Ali reportedly asked the panel in the morning for a larger panel to consider the petitions given their constitutional import. When the two-judge panel resumed its deliberations after lunch, Ali prevailed on Hussain to stop the proceedings until his request for an expanded panel could be considered. (Note: The Awami League has demanded the removal of Ali, among others, for alleged loyalty to the former ruling party.)

¶11. (SBU) The suspension of the hearing reportedly sent the pro-Awami League lawyers on a rampage, breaking up furniture and proceeding outdoors to burn two vehicles. According to a 1500 local television news report, lawyers associated with the Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party were "chasing each other" around the premises.

¶12. (SBU) At 1615 local, Attorney General Ali phoned us to report that prominent opposition lawyer Rokonuddin Mahmud had assaulted him, that eminent constitutional lawyer Kamal Hussein had threatened to kill former law minister Ahmed, and that he, Ali, was trapped inside a room at the Supreme Court compound. Police reinforcements had arrived, he said, but he was afraid to exit his hideout.

Comment

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¶13. (C) While it is difficult to imagine the portly lawyers Mahmud and Hossain assaulting anyone, the fracas at the court house does reflect gradually escalating political tensions in the run up to the December 3 blockade deadline. Student activists of the two parties have clashed on several campuses, and perceptions of Chief Adviser Ahmed as biased and ineffective are spreading. As many as eight of the ten caretaker government advisers are reportedly contemplating resignation out of frustration with their marginalization, which could strip the government of its last shreds of credibility.

¶14. (C) The Awami League may itself be frustrated over the presumption that opposition agitation is bluster and that it will ultimately join the elections. Moreover, its "victories" in driving Justice Hassan and M.A. Aziz from the scene seem actually to have made its position more precarious, leaving it to brandish a threat -- of blockades -- that its rivals take comfort in knowing imposes great hardship on voters. For the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, there is also some sincere frustration over what it sees as endless and pointless Awami League demands.

¶15. (C) Although both parties have shown unexpected restraint the past four weeks, there is a new possibility of violence if the blockade resumes and the caretaker government this time takes bolder steps to break it. Army Chief of Staff General Moen had planned to go to Doha to watch the Asia Games to signal the army's disinterest in political adventurism, but two days ago he decided to stay put. According to political and military sources, the army has pressed for a state of emergency if army troops are deployed to give it a freer operational hand without reference to local officials. Thus, unless there is strong direction from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, deployment of the army could mean a significant escalation of the political crisis, including a delay in the election.

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